

The Urban Agriculture Policy Task Force was initiated by Southside Community Land Trust, as a subcommittee of Citywide Green, in 2004. This coalition of more than 25 members –farmers, policy-makers, community agencies, and advocates –promotes policy changes that will ensure the future of food production in the Providence metropolitan area.

Task Force Members:

- Farm Fresh RI

Southside Community Land Trust

Rhode Island Green Party

Elmwood Foundation

Kids First

RI Center for Agriculture Promo-  
tion and Education

Citywide Green

Woonasquatucket River Water-  
shed Council
- Puente

RI DEM / Division of Agriculture

RI Department of Health

RI Food Bank

Cleanscape, Inc

Project Outreach

West Bay Community Action

Olneyville Collaborative and Ol-  
neyville Housing

URI - Feinstein Center for Hunger

- Red Planet

RI Land Trust Council

Providence Parks Department

Southern RI Conservation District

Roger Williams Park Zoo

URI - Cooperative Extension

The Cambodian Society of RI

Friends of India Point Park

Groundwork Providence

Planted on Hope

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# URBAN AGRICULTURE IN PROVIDENCE:

*Growing our community by growing good food*



## ***What does Urban Agriculture mean to Providence?***

Rows of lettuce growing at SouthSide Community Land Trust's City Farm



- Keeping our families healthy
- Supplementing family incomes
- Supporting local businesses
- Creating jobs
- Keeping local dollars recirculating locally
- Increasing property values
- Creating stewards of the city's green spaces
- Creating a clean, healthy environment
- Reflecting the richness of our city's cultures
- Connecting neighbor-to-neighbor, generation-to-generation and culture-to-culture



The vision of the Providence Urban Agriculture Task Force is to double the amount of food being grown in and around Providence in the next ten years. This will be achieved by increasing the number of home gardeners, community gardeners, community gardens, commercial community agriculture projects, and urban agriculture businesses.

### **What do we need to make this happen?**

- Public education about garden benefits and safety,
- Conversion of more land into valued growing spaces,
- City codes that support agriculture, and
- Policies that make agriculture a major part of Providence's community and economic development strategy.





Urban agriculture is as old as cities, and just as new. World-wide, more than 15% of city dwellers' diets come from foods grown intensively on small urban lots. In gleaming modern cities like Vancouver and Toronto 40% of city dwellers grow food. Ten percent of greater London is farmed, with more than 30,000 allotment gardeners– including some 1,000 beekeepers.

Throughout the world, people in all economic strata garden for food. For many urban poor, engaging in urban agriculture has kept body and soul together, especially in times of economic upheaval, war, and natural disasters.

In the United States, many city people rely on local food gardens and farms for community food security. Businesses in urban agriculture are springing up in every major city, contributing to city revitalization initiatives. Urban market growers and farmers markets create local jobs, provide food, and transform neglected land into productive use.

## What's Happening in Providence?

The 180,000 residents of Providence eat 540,000 pounds of food everyday. Less than 2% of Providence households grow food, providing only 1% of the city's total diet. Providence does not begin to approach global averages for urban agriculture, and lags behind even our neighboring communities in the amount of food grown within our city limits. As our city and the world around us change, it is critical that Providence residents grow more of our own food.

Every pound of food we ship into Providence uses expensive gasoline and increases global warming. Every pound we grow here builds our community.

Providence is among the most densely populated cities in the country, and is in the midst of development boom. High demand for land and Providence's industrial past mean that little space is available for growing food, and land that is available is often marred by our toxic legacy of chemicals and lead.



Recommendation: We must find ways to preserve land for food production and provide the resources and infrastructure for growers to prosper as our city and the world change.

## Growing for Families

In August, 2005, the Providence Urban Agriculture Policy Task Force and neighborhood volunteers completed a brief walking survey that counted 57 gardens in small portions of the Smith Hill, Elmwood, Summit, and Reservoir neighborhoods. These are but a fraction of the estimated 500 home gardens that supplement the nutrition and incomes of Providence families.

Southside Community Land Trust provides community garden space for 200 families in the Southside and West End of the city. Other community gardens are found throughout the city, from Manton Avenue to Mount Hope.

All in all, over a thousand Providence families grow some portion of their own food. This means over 2000 people eating better and supporting their family incomes by producing food inside the city of Providence.

A 10 ft by 10 ft family garden plot provides a Providence family with at least \$80.00 worth of food over the course of a summer, which translates to at least \$80,000 worth of food being grown right here in small plots across the city.

Providence's home gardeners and community gardeners say the same thing: they love to garden, and the food they grow is important to their family.



Recommendation: Support families in becoming food producers by:

- Converting un-used land owned by the City, community agencies, businesses, churches, and neighborhood groups into community food gardens
- Creating a municipal curb-side compost system
- Providing small grants to help families create food gardens at home

### A Portrait of a Family Gardener: Lon Tang

Lon Tang (pictured on the facing page) was a farmer in Cambodia before he fled the Khmer Rouge in 1979. He came to Providence as a refugee in 1981. Soon after, friends led him to Southside Community Land Trust, which gave him the opportunity to grow traditional Cambodian foods for his family. Lon's wife, mother-in-law, cousin and four children all love to grow and cook good food together. Lon began as a community gardener, and then moved onto a vacant city lot where, until the lot was built on, he raised organically grown Asian specialty crops for his family and for 15 restaurants and markets in Providence.

Lon is proud of the example he sets for his children and his community, and of the contribution he makes to his home city, Providence. "It is important to pay back the people that helped me and my family do the right thing- make food for people.

If you want a strong country, you need strong food."





## Growing for Local Community Organizations

Nationally, non-profit community development and educational demonstration projects based on commercial food gardens generate between 10 and 85% of their program expenses from produce sales. Since 1981, Southside Community Land Trust's comprehensive urban agriculture programs have contributed to increased health, youth leadership, stronger neighborhoods, micro-enterprise development, and environmental stewardship for thousands of city dwellers. SCLT's programs are partially supported through produce and product sales; "walking the walk" as a model for urban gardeners and farmers who want to grow for market.

SCLT's \_\_-acre City Farm, an education site in Southside Providence, earns 65% of its operating budget from its plant sale and sales at farmers markets. On a smaller scale, youth in one of SCLT's youth programs raised their summer stipends from the sale of their product, FISHEMO (fish emulsion fertilizer) to other local growers.

The multiplier effects of urban agriculture as a successful intervention for at-risk youth and community development more than make up for the need to supplement these worthy initiatives through other funding sources.

Recommendation: Promote community, economic and youth development by adequately funding non-profit urban agricultural initiatives.



### A Portrait of an Urban Agricultural Experiment:

The Urban Agricultural Unit (UAU) is a mobile hydroponic greenhouse designed for educational, artistic, and commercial purposes. Constructed from a discarded shipping container, the structure's innovative design is an example of the adaptive reuse of materials within the constraints of an urban setting.

The UAU is educational because it is functional. The project's participants, comprised of volunteers and students, share their knowledge and skills in order to improve the viability of urban agriculture on a larger scale. The project is also intended to foster community wide understanding of the advantages and necessity of thinking "out of the box" with respect to urban development. Coupling industrial waste with advanced agricultural technology, the UAU project is devoted to discovering how to do more... with less.





### A Portrait of Providence Agricultural Entrepreneurs:

“It’s important to us that the food is hyper-local, grown where it is sold.” — Matt Tracy, Farmer and Artist

Catherine Mardosa and Matt Tracy (pictured on facing page) are heroes of urban agriculture. They began their business, Red Planet Urban Farm, with support from the SCLT City Farm. Red Planet grows organic produce on formerly neglected lots throughout Providence, as well as a small plot in Rehoboth. Recently, Catherine and Matt purchased a 5,000 square foot lot in Olneyville, exchanging one of Matt’s paintings for the services of a property lawyer to help them complete the purchase.

Red Planet uses as many local resources as possible, enriching the urban soil with compost from their West End and Federal Hill neighbors, coffee grounds from local cafes, crab shells from Warren and seaweed from local beaches.

Red Planet vegetables are sold through farmers’ markets around the city, through the Urban Greens Food Co-Op, and through local restaurants.

## Growing Businesses

Commercial growers inside Providence’s city bounds are not many, but these urban farmers generate as much as \$100,000 an acre in sales. Their cash crops are primarily vegetables and artisanal specialty foods that are sold and bartered in niche markets such as restaurants, Urban Greens Food Co-op, ethnic groceries and flea markets. In a compact city like Providence, farms on the urban edge also contribute significantly to the nutritional and economic wellbeing of the urban community.

The five Providence farmers’ markets connect growing agricultural businesses with a growing customer base, providing fresh, nutritious food and stimulating economic growth. The city’s commercial growers share their success with donations of thousands of pounds of produce to local food pantries and the Rhode Island Food Bank.



Recommendation: Support local farm businesses by:

- Providing local growers with low-interest loans and other micro-enterprise supports for start-up and land acquisition,
- Supporting the creation of a year-round Providence Farmers’ Market to extend the economic benefits of local agriculture are extended throughout the year, and
- Continuing support of local businesses and needy families through ongoing federal and state subsidies such as WIC and Seniors’ Farmers’ Market Vouchers.



## Connecting our Kids with Healthy Foods: The Farm-to-School Initiative

What child doesn't love crispy, crunchy, sun-sweetened, just-picked fruits and veggies? They all do! The problem is not convincing kids to eat these foods but rather figuring out a way to put these healthier food options within reach. Luckily, food grown by farms in and around Providence offer that unbeatable flavor and freshness. Our challenge is to connect farms and schools in the Providence Region.

Linking farms and Providence-area schools is a great idea: Not only is the food fresher (which translates into kids eating more healthfully) but connecting city kids with the open space that surrounds them is the simplest form of environmental education. Providence's young citizens need to know what fertile soil and open space means to them. They need to know where food comes from.



- Recommendation: Connect kids with fresh local foods in schools by:
- Funding a state-wide Farm to School Coordinator,
  - Passing legislation that creates financial incentives for businesses to purchase RI-grown foods,
  - Integrating Farm-to-School teaching materials into RI Department of Health toolkits for the Wellness Subcommittees of all RI school districts,
  - Linking school service directors with farmers, so each of RI's 36 school districts make at least one local food purchase each year, and
  - Subsidizing a USDA Free Fruit and Vegetable Program in Rhode Island.

## Creating Land Use Policies that Encourage Urban Agriculture: Zoning and the Comprehensive Plan

Zoning and Comprehensive Planning both arose in response to the ills of urbanization. These tools were originally focused on keeping incompatible uses apart; principally keeping dangerous factories out of residential neighborhoods. Now these tools are used to better our neighborhoods by addressing citizen needs.

Unfortunately, while there is an expression of support for urban agriculture in the City of Providence Comprehensive Plan, it contains few specific actions to be undertaken to promote the growing of food in backyards, community gardens or on small farms.

Now, due to their age, both the Zoning Ordinance and Comprehensive Plan of Providence are being updated. This provides a tremendous opportunity to protect and promote urban agriculture in a variety of forms by including innovative ideas found in other cities.

Recommendation: Encourage urban agriculture in Providence by:

- Creating new community gardens on city property, using the P-Patch program in Seattle as a model,
- Implementing an overnight on-street parking program to get pavement out of backyards and gardens back in,
- Include language allowing small scale, hand tended farms, like Red Planet and CityFarm, to operate within the city limits, in harmony with their neighbors, and
- Remove Special Use Permit requirements for community gardens in residential neighborhoods and create design standards that are beneficial to both the neighborhood and the gardens' users.



## Gardening Safely in Lead-Contaminated Soil

Providence is a city of industry and history. While these characteristics play an important role in the Providence of today, they have also left a hidden danger. Lead from factories and historic homes has found its way into the very foundation of Providence, its soil. Lead causes significant and irreversible harm to the developing nervous systems of children. Great vigilance is required both inside and outside of our homes to deal with this threat.

But just as children can be harmed by lead, time in a garden and exposure to vegetables can change a life for the better. They provide nutrition, education, relaxation, and exposure to the natural world. Gardens allow cultural traditions to thrive.

For more information on gardening safely in city soil, call Southside Community Land Trust at (401)273-9419 to request a copy of a lead safety brochure.

Recommendation: Teach Providence residents:

- To keep children away from exposed soil unless you know that it is not contaminated,
- To get soil tested and safe gardening advice through URI Cooperative Extension,
- About the inexpensive ways to improve soil and reduce lead uptake by plants, and
- When contaminated soil is present, to build containers or raised beds and keep on growing!

